

The Mys

Nuoxi, one of the most popular operas in southwestern China, has a long history. Characterized by its special features—such as the ferocious masks, unique dresses and adornments, the strange language, and mysterious scenes—it has been selected as one of China's non-material cultural legacies. The opera integrates religious and dramatic culture. The masks, an important aspect of the performance art, can be considered a treasure of the folk art.

中国的傩戏具有悠久的历史，以其狰狞的面具、奇特的服饰、凝重的动作、古怪的言语和充满神秘的场景而独具特色，被评为国家非物质文化遗产。傩戏是宗教文化与戏剧文化相结合的产物，而作为其重要艺术手段的傩面具又堪称民族艺术百花园中的珍品。

Photo by CFP

神秘的傩文化
——傩戏与傩面具

Nuoxi: erious Chinese Opera and Its Masks

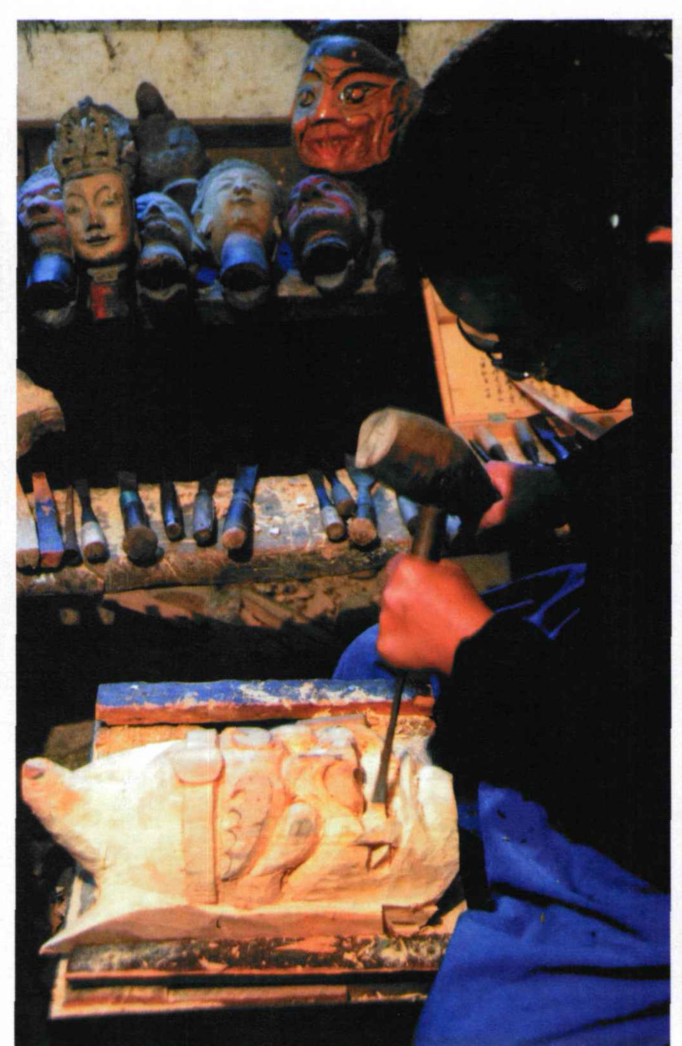
Photos by ZHANG TIANLIN/Sun-pic
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Long History
悠久的历史

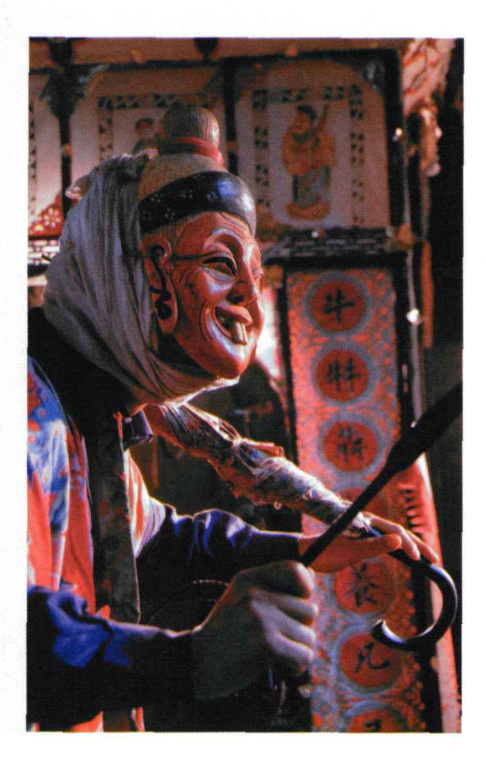
Historical records indicate *Nuoji*, a special sacrificial activity, dates back to antiquity. While performing religious rites, people prayed to ward off disasters and receive good luck. Around the Song Dynasty (420-479), people started to perform with masks during *Nuoji*, thus *Nuoxi* was formed. During the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), *Nuoxi*, which had separated from *Nuoji*, had become a unique performing art. During the 1930s and 1940s, *Nuoxi* began to be shown in some busy cities and towns.

In ancient times, *Nuoji* and *Nuoxi* were popular in southwestern China. The opera was quite popular in the Yangtze, Yellow and Nenjiang river valleys. However, with social and cultural development, the opera's popularity waned in the river valleys. It remains popular in southwestern areas, including Guizhou, Yunnan, Sichuan, Hubei and Hunan provinces, and the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. It is especially popular in the regions inhabited by some ethnic minorities, such as the Miao, Dong, Yao and Tu jia.









Charming, Colorful Plastic Arts
多姿多彩的造型艺术

The most distinctive feature of *Nuoxi* is the performers wear masks. Different roles require different masks to reveal the characters, through their changing facial features and decorations. The masks are highly aesthetic.

The plastic arts, select materials, colors and applications of *Nuoxi* masks vary among the regions, ethnic groups, culture and aesthetic interests. That distinctiveness adds to the masks' enchanting beauty.

Nuoxi involves many acrobatic performances, such as getting into a hot pot, holding burned stones, crossing a fiery pit, swallowing and blowing fire, and stepping on a mountain of swords. As most of the performers are specially trained, they are good at giving exciting performances.

Religious and Customary Meanings
宗教与民俗含义

The masks are endowed with mysterious religious and customary meanings, both in *Nuoji* activities and *Nuoxi* performances. People in *Nuo* cultural circles, who regard the masks as the symbols and carriers of gods, observe various rules and conventions. For example, the ceremony of enshrining a Buddha statue is held before making the masks; before using them, the ceremony of opening the case; and storing them, the ceremony of sealing the case.

According to rules, women are not allowed to touch or wear the masks, and only men may produce, use and store them. Once a man wears a mask, he is supposed to be possessed by a god or spirit, and, therefore, he must not speak or act freely.

(Executive Editors: GU WENTONG and LI JIANGSHU 责任编辑：顾文同 李江树)